

Classical antiquity and the making of the Fitzwilliam Museum

Lucilla Burn

Shakespeare isn't alone in enjoying a special anniversary this year. The Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge is 200. Hurrah! Now home to a wonderful collection of Greek and Roman artefacts, it took a while for it to acquire these. Lucilla Burn, Assistant Director and Keeper of Greek and Roman antiquities, gives us a glimpse of where they came from and of the Museum's origins and history.

Two hundred years ago, on 4 February 1816, Richard, 7th Viscount Fitzwilliam of Merrion, died in his rooms in New Bond Street, London (now part of Sotheby's auction house). In his will he bequeathed to the University of Cambridge his collection of paintings, engravings, music, manuscripts and printed books, plus £100,000 to build 'a good, substantial and convenient Museum' in which to house them. But his generosity took the University by surprise, and it would be another thirty-two years before the current Museum on Trumpington Street opened.

The architect of the new Museum was George Basevi and his design a 'temple of the arts' inspired by classical antiquity. Antiquity underwrote even his most practical solutions (e.g. elevating the building on a pedestal to ensure that it might command attention even on the cramped site on which it had to be built): as he saw it, 'the effect of the Portico of the Pantheon at Rome is injured by its present low position and the vicinity of other buildings', whereas 'the detached and elevated situation of the Greek temples accords with their symmetry, ... always standing on a high platform...'.

Sadly, Basevi failed to see the project to its conclusion, falling to his death from scaffolding in Ely Cathedral. It took Charles Robert Cockerell to complete it: Cockerell was another neo-classical architect and one of the men to have brought the internal frieze from the Temple of Bassae in Arcadia (now in the British Museum) and the pediments of the Temple of Aphaia at Aegina (in the Munich Glyptothek) to public attention.

Collecting Greece and Rome

Although the Museum's founder, Lord Fitzwilliam, had travelled extensively in continental Europe, he had formed no collection of antiquities. But even before the Museum was built, the University had begun to acquire some, mainly as gifts from alumni. In 1803, clergyman, traveller, and mineralogist, Edward Daniel Clarke had donated a number of inscriptions and pieces of sculpture, including the colossal upper part of a caryatid from Eleusis, displayed first in the University Library; in 1835 a magnificent Roman sarcophagus, found not in Italy but on Crete and decorated with a scene of Dionysus' triumphant return from India, arrived in Cambridge. Still today, it is known as the 'Pashley sarcophagus' after the Fellow of Trinity College, Robert Pashley, who had pieced it back together and shipped it.

But these were insufficient for a major museum, and two years before the Museum's opening, Cockerell was imagining how the three main ground-floor galleries would suit 'such capital works of ancient sculpture as might ... illustrate the studies of the university in classical archaeology. The Divinities, with their illustrated bas reliefs, the Muses, the Niobe, the Laocoon, the Caesars etc. would be comprehended in about 70 to 80 pieces; all of which might be advantageously placed and lighted'. Fortunately, in 1850, further gifts were received: first, some ninety inscriptions and other items of classical, mainly Roman, sculpture (sarcophagi to reliefs and busts), from the collection of Dr John Disney, and second (and able to supply the Niobe and

Laocoon that Cockerell wanted), a substantial set of plaster casts. Casts had long been collectable and were nigh on interchangeable with the originals.

The Fitzwilliam's classical holdings received a further boost in 1864, when the University agreed to purchase the coins, Greek vases, and bronze figurines that Colonel William Martin Leake had acquired in travels attached to his surveys of the coast of Albania and the Peloponnese. The study of classical art and the development of archaeology as a discipline were both growing rapidly in these decades, so much so that its classical antiquities increased the Museum's status within the University, enabling it to appoint its first professional Director in 1876. By 1880, the University had also appointed its first Lecturer in Classical Archaeology and continued to buy casts, including those of the new finds from Olympia. In 1884, the Fitzwilliam's casts were moved to a separate Museum of Classical and General Archaeology where they were cemented as a teaching collection. Today they are still used for teaching, and are accessible by the public. You can see more than 400 of them on the first floor of Cambridge's Faculty of Classics.

Subsequent generations at the Fitzwilliam were not neglectful of antiquity. Take, for example, Montague Rhodes James, a man perhaps best known as the author of spine-chillingly inventive ghost stories, including the collections (1904) *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* and (1911) *More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, which he wrote while Director of the Museum. Although a mediaevalist by training, cataloguing the majority of mediaeval manuscripts in the various Cambridge collections, he was also sympathetic to archaeology, of which he had direct experience when in 1887 he was sent to join the Cyprus Exploration Fund's excavations where he worked primarily on the inscriptions, in Greek, Latin, or obscure Cypriot scripts and dialects.

In 1894, the year after James took up the Directorship, the Fitzwilliam Museum

began to receive its share of the finds from the Egypt Exploration Society's excavations in the Greek city of Naukratis in Egypt. And indeed its collection is still growing. One of the most recent acquisitions (in 2012) is a grey limestone relief decorated with scenes from Greek mythology, including Odysseus and the Sirens. Excavated by Scottish painter and art-dealer, Gavin Hamilton, at Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli in the eighteenth century, it was sold to the Marquis of Lansdowne in London and installed as the mantle of an elegant chimney-piece in his house to the south west of Berkeley Square, a house that was partially demolished in the 1930s and whose rooms dispersed to institutions in the UK and USA. It is an unusual antiquity with a rich post-antique history.

Shifting sands

Today, many of the 400,000 visitors who come to the Fitzwilliam Museum each year spend time browsing in the Greek and Roman gallery, which was completely 'rehung' in 2008–10 by a team that included two of *Omnibus*'s editors! The history of the antiquities collections, like that of the Museum as a whole, has now become a major subject for research: and the new display celebrates the excavators and collectors of the past (individuals like Clarke, Leake, and Lansdowne), alongside ancient makers and consumers. Sometimes this research throws up some real surprises: so the 'Minoan snake goddess', purchased with great excitement in 1926 and thought to date to c. 1700–1450 B.C., has since been outed as a modern work made by one of the Cretan craftsmen who worked with Sir Arthur Evans in restoring the Minoan site of Knossos early in the twentieth century, and, conversely, the Linear B tablet donated by Evans in 1911 and believed to be a modern copy, was in the 1980s identified as ancient. To understand antiquities, it pays to know their history.

Lucilla's book on the history of the Fitzwilliam is published by IB Tauris and offers you an excellent introduction. The accompanying exhibition, Celebrating the First 200 Years: The Fitzwilliam Museum 1816–2016, runs until the 30th December. With characteristic modesty, she forgot to say that she orchestrated the redisplay of the Greek and Roman Gallery and the temporary loan, and then acquisition, of the Lansdowne Relief.

If you have never been to the Fitzwilliam Museum or to the Faculty's Cast Gallery, do pay them a visit.

See <http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk> and <http://www.classics.cam.ac.uk/museum>